

Learning and Money

Children as Pawns in Dependency Game

Krishna Kumar

A consensus of interests has emerged inspiring everyone concerned to believe that the new money available for primary education is a sign of change of heart among the wealthy and that it represents a rare opportunity for us to break the cycle of poverty, child labour, lack of education and poor productivity.

DEPENDENCE on foreign resources for expansion and improvement of primary education, and privatisation of higher education are two salient features of the emerging educational policy. Considering that neither has systemic precedence, together they can be said to form the real and 'new' educational policy replacing the much-publicised National Policy document of 1986. It is not as if 1986 was too early to foreshadow the impending. On the contrary, plans for large-scale induction of foreign resources - both funds and expertise - were already afloat and international consultants knew what was cooking in the oven of development business. In retrospect it looks as if it was all a coincidence, but such a view can only be superficial though it has the merit of being consolatory. As far as India is concerned, it is clear that in the years during which the Jomtien conference (March 1990) on 'Education for All' (EFA) was being planned, details of the social safety network were also being worked out to be revealed to the innocent after the announcement of the structural adjustment programme (SAP). Jomtien is now referred to as a turning point at which the attention of the wealthy nation-states was forced upon the plight of the poor, especially the latter's children. No one now needs to be told that Jomtien was merely the venue of a public ceremony at which the poor were introduced into the nasty new world of post-cold war capitalism. For India, Jomtien was the beginning of a structurally adjusted political economy of education. It is hardly surprising that policy documents of the 90s mention Jomtien rather than the Indian Constitution as the origin of the concept of universal schooling. To expect that Gokhale or Tagore might have formed relevant references is to be too arcane and hopelessly 'swadeshi' which only the RSS can afford to be.

Let us realise that there is nothing startling for us to discover in the new economy of primary education, simply because the government has by itself revealed it all. The document titled 'Education for All', published by the government on the occasion of the so-called summit (most heads of states

remained absent) of nine high-population countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan) held in December 1993, states with transparency: 'The concept of comprehensive district-based projects came of age with the launching of the District Primary Education (DPEP) - the primary education component of the Social Safety Net Adjustment Credit financed by IDA' (sic).¹ True, these words were written for a clientele consisting mainly of educationists who have little interest in the meaning of words like 'adjustment' and 'social safety'. Individuals who might be familiar with the history of IDA funding and its aftermath in Africa and Latin America have been marginalised, in any case, as part of the fashioning of the new ideological state apparatus of education. If the new class of professional experts and assistants serving education were to be told that 'social safety' really means discouraging political turmoil expected as a result of the 'adjustment', and 'adjustment' means getting ready for deeper penetration by advanced capitalism, they will find this kind of decoding quite uninteresting. Bureaucrats are, of course, aware of these meanings, but their roles and positions do not permit them to acknowledge this awareness, let alone use it to steer policy. Many politicians too know these meanings, but they privately acknowledge the futility of efforts to stem the force of new economic agendas. Thus, a consensus of interests has emerged, inspiring everyone concerned to believe that the new money available for primary education is a sign of change of heart among the wealthy and that it represents a rare opportunity for us to break the cycle of poverty, child labour, lack of education and poor productivity.

It is noteworthy that in the army of educationists and pedagogues currently under recruitment across the country, members of non-government organisations (NGOs) have a very special place. Jomtien diction recognises NGOs as 'prime delivery mechanisms'. That the NGOs could provide a valuable intermediary class, having links with bureaucratic and industrial elites on

one hand and the downtrodden on the other, is certainly one attraction. But a more palpable reason to recruit them as agents of state-sponsored programmes is that it protects them against the tendency to get politicised in the course of working for the poor. NGOs working for women and children have presented plenty of examples of this tendency in the recent past; the process of induction in well-funded (read foreign-funded) state programmes discourages this tendency. Moreover, NGOs impart a pluralistic character to development, masking its monotonic, ideological roar which has become increasingly unbearable since the 70s when Doris Lessing recorded it in her *Summer before the Dark*.² The young, often highly sensitive and professionally competent members of NGOs, need to be brought into the international business of development and socialised into the culture of sponsored work, or else they might lend their weight to social and political forces impeding development work, for instance in the case of Narmada dams. It is time we recognised that NGOs are conceptually a part of the state apparatus, not outside it; practically, there may be substantial resistance among NGOs to being co-opted.

Foreign loan and aid for primary education now constitute a significant part of the social safety network - a euphemism used for maintaining the facade of the welfare state while it is being demolished and reassembled into a commercial agency state serving global capitalism. Foreign-assisted projects like the DPEP have a scale unprecedented in the history of social programmes assisted from outside. The DPEP started in 43 districts; within the Eighth Plan period, it will spread to 110 districts, and the number will more than double soon thereafter. The kind of money it provides for at the district level implies an enhancement of five times or more of customary spending. The fact that donor agencies are not sure about the district-level machinery's ability to spend this much more money is best reflected in terms like 'capacity building' and 'accountability' which dot programme documents more than any other technical terms. As it happens, district-level proposals were written according to the format provided by the donor agencies themselves, and monitoring by foreign experts and consultants continues to be followed as a norm a little too visibly under the cover of decentralised planning and self-monitoring. The excess money presents an all too real, and in certain states already manifest, risk of soaking the new Panchayati Raj to its roots in corruption. There is also the risk of creating heavy liabilities for the future. Is the creation of such liabilities a part of the scenario of engineered indebtedness and political

vulnerability Wadi Hadded, World Bank's representative to the UN, offers us the basis for precisely this question when he says that an aid-receiving country "needs a level of expenditure in the next decade or two that may not be self-sustainable, in order to reach the higher levels of development in subsequent decades, when it then (*sic*) will be able to sustain such expenditure on its own".³

It is clear that to believe in the correctness of the current policy of financial dependency for improvement in primary education one is required to believe in the ultimate promise of structural adjustment itself. The whole package is really a belief-structure as Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli show in their recent book on the World Bank.⁴ On the matter of World Bank's portrayal of a rosy future following the current phase of aid-dependent social programmes such as the DPEP, George and Sabelli correctly ask why the Bank failed miserably to predict the ghastly effects of debt-trapping which surfaced in many third world countries during the 1980s. How stark and tragic the effects were in the context of children's welfare formed the focus of UNICEF's report, *The State of the World's Children* in 1989. The report said in surprisingly clear but little noticed terms:

As the social effects of adjust processes become more obvious, it can also be seen that the heaviest burden is falling on the shoulders of those who are least able to sustain it... Over the last decade, for example, the proportion of government expenditure devoted to health has fallen in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa, in more than half the countries of Latin America and Caribbean, and in one-third of the nations of Asia. And the cuts have not been marginal... Meanwhile, the proportion of national budgets devoted to the military is approximately 30 per cent higher than total spending on health and education combined.

UNICEF's staff know from first-hand experience that in most countries the real cost of such cuts is being paid, disproportionately by the poor and by their children. And since 1984, we have been concerned to draw world attention to the social consequences of adjustment policies and to warn that the worst is yet to come.⁵

Surely we have the right to ask the government how it proposes to sustain high levels of expenditure on primary education after the social safety net provided by foreign help and loan is lifted. So far the government has not presented any plans for the future. Perhaps it is unnecessary to ask such questions when the government has not quite decided how to use the excess funds that have become available. Financial management has proved the most difficult aspect of 'capacity building', not just in the context of foreign funds but even the extra funds provided out of indigenous resources. The failure of Operation Blackboard in the states where it was most needed is a case

in point, The Comptroller and Auditor General's report released earlier this year found glaring deficiencies in the manner in which Operation Blackboard funds were utilised. In Madhya Pradesh, where DPEP has begun in full earnest under the auspices of the Rajiv Gandhi Mission, Operation Blackboard could not proceed beyond the second phase when inquiries into charges of corruption in its handling resulted in stoppage of further utilisation of the funds available under it. That was three years ago.

It is ominous that foreign-assisted primary education has received no systematic critical attention from educational institutions involved in research and professional training. The only critical piece to be published so far is Vinod Raina's in the *Alternative Economic Survey*, which says that the 'real danger' of DPEP lies in its capacity to purge the search for alternatives in education and "to bring it in line with a homogeneous and globalised world propelled by the market".⁶ The risk of education being used as a tool of ideological indoctrination is, of course, real, but not as direct and immediate as the one involved in the penetration of the rural hinterland by research methods and data-designs cloaking ulterior motives. It is not for nothing that under the banner of 'accountability', donor agencies are demanding achievement profiles of elementary school children. The emphasis on psychometric surveys and regular reporting on achievement levels attained by every child is a bit too loud for anyone to accept that it reflects a purely pedagogic concern. The language in which, for instance, a World Bank office memorandum talks about the modalities of achievement data is very suggestive indeed:

Modern psychometric techniques will be applied to student learning achievement data and each country will produce a national report describing achievement levels and the distribution of school resources by geographical areas, and types of schools and students, provide an analysis of the determinants of student achievement, analyse the effects of any policy changes on learning achievement changes over time and draw overall conclusions. This report should be produced regularly (annually, biannually, triannually). Approximately six months is (*sic*) required for analysis and report writing. Assistance will be provided for local researchers to conduct secondary data analysis and to publish their results in international refereed journals.⁷

It is hard to imagine that this elaborate data base on our children will have no use other than pedagogic reform. Why is it that one has never heard of such data being collected in developed countries, let alone published regularly? The ineffectiveness of primary education in some of the richest countries of the world, including the US and Canada, has been a frequently reported fact over the recent years, but no one has suggested

rigorous maintenance and publication of psychometric data as a remedy. Even the International Association for the Assessment of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies, which were carried out in the 70s on limited-size samples, were resented by many developed countries. Perhaps the real reason why our young professionals will be trained in psychometric techniques (educational research in India has already suffered enormously by exaggerated emphasis placed on such techniques in the training of researchers) and why our system will be asked to reveal each tiny detail of children's attainment by geographical region is such data can help in the geographical shaping of foreign investments, especially in the negotiations for investment potential of different regions.

These are only a few among the many questions we need to ask in order to probe the emerging political economy of primary education. There is, of course, no doubt that the current efforts, heavily funded though they are, will fail to stem the rise in child labour and school drop-out rate. Education for All will remain a mere slogan well into the first quarter of the coming century simply because economic compulsions imposed upon us in the post-GATT era can only result in the cheapening of our labour resources and the consequent exacerbation of problems such as child labour and child prostitution. The brave new world of global trading and capital moving at the speed of telecommunications offers no room for compassion and grace for children, especially those born in third world countries. The future of learning during childhood looks bleak everywhere, simply because advanced capitalism looks down upon the sacredness and specificity of the local milieu which Dewey had celebrated as a principle of sane pedagogy. The only hope there may be for children, especially ours, lies in the future of democratic politics which may reverse the sinister trends set by the structural adjustment programmes.

Notes

- 1 *Education for All The Indian Scene*, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, New Delhi, 1993, p 88.
- 2 Doris Lessing, *The Summer before the Dark*, Paladin, London, 1990.
- 3 Quoted in Kenneth King and Roy Carr-Hill, 'Changing Patterns of Development Assistance to Basic Education (Phase I)', paper presented at the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, Unesco, Paris, December 1991, p 14.
- 4 Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli, *Faith and Credit: The World Bank's Secular Empire*, Penguin, London, 1994.
- 5 *The State of the World's Children*, 1989, Unicef, OUP, Oxford, 1989, pp 16-17.
- 6 Vinod Raina, 'Elementary Education: A Donor Driven Agenda' in *The State of India's Economy 1994-95*, Public Interest Research Group, New Delhi, 1995, pp 83-85, p 85.
- 7 World Bank Office Memorandum from Marlaire E Lockheed. March 12. 1991.